AVOIDING MISLEADING MAPS: ENCODING AND DECODING

2018 MIDTERM ELECTION RESULTS IN GRAPHICS

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ABSTRACT

News organizations often employ graphics to represent election results, often using shaded maps to show areas won by each candidate. However, these maps have been criticized as misleading, because they represent land, not population. This research examines alternative forms of graphics for displaying election results and how they are produced in newsrooms. Qualitative interviews with data visualization designers show that due to disproportionality of geographical and population in the U.S., election graphics showing geographical information often requires a compromise to emphasize either the number of votes, or the geographical boundaries, but journalists can improve accessibility and accuracy of graphics with better design in color, shading, page layout, interactivity. Results also show that newsrooms will also design their graphics to prioritize their specialty in election coverage and employ various forms of visualization to paint the full picture. This study also found that more user testing is warranted to inform their design, and reporters can use election coverage as means to educating the readers on how to decode election graphics and enhancing their understanding the information encoded the visualizations in elections.